Developing Senior Management Teams in Schools: Can Micropolitics help?

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Abstract:

While there is a vast body of *literature that examines the role* of *the principal in schools, it has been only relatively recently that attention has focused on the working practices and relationships o f members in the Senior Management Team (SMT). This paper suggests that the study* of *micropolitics has potential for illuminating SMTs since it provides a lens to understand the dynamics* of *the team and the interactions and inter-relationships between and amongst their members. This micropolitical lens is concerned with how players use a variety* of *strategies such as power, coercion, cooperation, cooption and influence to obtain resources and achieve goals. This paper examines some* of *the recent research into SMTs and micropolitics and identifies five hey issues or pointers that may be linked to either facilitating or inhibiting the effective functioning* of *SMTs in schools. The set* of *issues provides a useful framework for members of SMTs to critically reflect upon as they seek to build shared purpose, cooperation and collaboration.*

Introduction

This paper suggests that the study of micropolitics has potential for illuminating important aspects of school organisational life, in particular Senior Management Teams (SMTs). These teams, which play an important role in the formal leadership of schools, typically comprise senior personnel such as the Principal/Head, Deputy Principal(s)/Deputy Head(s) and other key officers - for example, in secondary schools, they might include Heads of Department. As micropolitics is concerned with how key players use a variety of strategies such as power, coercion, cooperation, cooption and influence to obtain resources and achieve goals (Blase and Anderson, 1995), it provides a lens to understand the dynamics, interactions and inter-relationships between and amongst members of such teams. It is worth noting that the discussion here may also be relevant for other key bodies in schools, such as school councils or boards which would comprise similar personnel as SMTs, but also include some parent, teacher and possibly wider community membership.

There has been a growing literature in recent years examining the changing roles of, and demands on, Principals or school Heads as a result of devolution and school-based management developments (see for example, Caldwell, 1994; Harrold, 1998; Cranston, 2002; Gronn, 2003). Less well researched have been the working practices and relationships of members in the Senior Management Team. Yet, under school based management, the reality is that principals do not act alone; they work not only with members of the SMT but also other staff and the wider school community (Cardno, 1995) Gronn (2003) notes this "emergence" of SMTs has resulted from a range of influences, including the greater managerial complexity in school management and administration through a desire for collaboration (p. 111).

Interest arises, then, in endeavouring to understand the dynamics between and among members within these senior teams and the characteristics that might be important in achieving team effectiveness. This paper suggests that examining the meaning and nature of micropolitical activity might well make a significant contribution to that understanding. The paper begins by examining some of the relevant micropolitical literature and research and concludes with a synthesis of some key issues or pointers for consideration by members of SMTs which can be used as a framework for critical reflection as they seek to build shared purpose, cooperation and collaboration.

Why Teams?

Before looking more closely at micropolitics, it is instructive to contextualise' teams and teamwork in the operation of schools today.

Drach-Zahavy and Somech (2002) observe that team-based structures in schools reflect the "widely shared democracy ideology ... as well as a more instrumental belief that team work offers the potential to achieve outcomes that could not be achieved by individuals working isolation" (p. 44). Cardno (1998, p. 47) sees the use of teams as connected to collaborative management notions and that:

> Teamwork is important because it has both idealistic and practical dimensions. Ideally, it is connected to values of cooperation and collaboration, while on a practical level it provides the means for functional groups to carry out tasks in self-managed school structures.

In essence, it could be argued that school-based management and self-management trends throughout education systems around the world have been predicated on ideals of collaboration and the building and functioning of effective teams. Indeed, writers such as Caldwell and Spinks (1992) and Bolam et al (1993) have some time ago highlighted an interest in Senior Management Teams and other collaborative bodies in schools moving towards self-management. In examining bodies such as school SMTs, Drach-Zahavy and Somech's (2002) research concludes that "schools that rely on these teams to carry out significant tasks should be prepared to monitor the internal dynamics and longer term outcomes of their teams and learn from their experiences" (p. 61). It is these "internal dynamics" of teams where micropolitics provides some useful notions. In fact, as West (1999) argues for schools in the United Kingdom, "there has never been a time when an awareness of micropolitcal processes and interactions was more useful to headteachers" (p. 176). The nature of School Management Teams is now considered in more detail.

Senior Management Teams

As noted earlier, in response to devolution and school-based management thrusts across past decades, Senior Management Teams typically hold considerable responsibilities for the management of schools in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Wallace and Hall, 1994; Walker and Stott, 1993). These responsibilities include making major decisions on behalf of the stall about school policy and practice and the overall running of the school (Hall and Wallace, 1996). As such, SMT`s occupy a powerful place in school-decision making and are key contributors to leadership in the school.

Despite their existence in schools for some time now, and the important role they play in school life, in Australia, little research has been conducted into SMTs. Cardno (1999) has made a similar claim in relation to the dearth of research on SMTs in New Zealand where self-management notions, and hence SMTs, have been in evidence for almost 25 years. What research has been undertaken, although still small, has mainly come from the United Kingdom.

Composition of SMTs

The personnel composition of SMTs is often school specific, although inclusion of the Head/Principal and Deputy Head(s)/Deputy Principals' is typical. Wallace and Hall's (1994) case study research of SMTs in secondary schools in the UK, indicated that membership extended beyond the Principal and Deputy- Principals to include one or more senior teaching staff. II the focus is extended to school councils or boards, parents. teachers and possibly representatives of the wider community are also likely to hold membership. in some small primary schools that consisted of fewer than ten teachers, Wallace and Huckman (1996) noted that all teaching staff could constitute the SMT. They also reported that membership on the team was not automatic. Rather, several principles governed the formation of SMTs, including: the necessity of ensuring coverage of major areas of school wide management: a conception of what constituted a balanced team in terms of personalities and expertise; recognition of existing senior post holders and the desirability of fluid membership to allow other staff interests to be included at particular times (Wallace and Hall, 1994, p. 184). Noteworthy is the fact that the issue of who is included and who is excluded on SMTs is a micropolitical question itself, in so far as such decisions and the consequences of those decisions are likely to require reference to power, interpersonal relationships, collaboration and cooperation.

Critical Role of the Head/Principal in SMTs

Not surprisingly, research on SMTs in both primary and secondary schools has revealed that principals play and occupy a critical role in the Senior Management Team (Wallace and Hall, 1994, Wallace and Huckman, 1996, 1999; Hall and Wallace, 1996: Wallace, 2002; Walker and Stott, 1993). For example, Wallace and Hall (1994, p.184) reported that teams could not exist without the commitment and leadership of principals, because they alone have the authority to create conditions for others to participate in sharing the decision-making. Principals hold major responsibility for creating and promoting a culture of team work which includes laying the ground rules for meetings; Setting the agenda for joint work and helping to identify the tasks and responsibilities of other members (Wallace and Hall, 1994; Hall and Wallace, 1996). Wallace (2002) uses the term "gatekeepers" to refer to their role in monitoring the contribution of other staff to the management of the school.

The Principal holds a unique position on the SMT as they are both leader of the team and, at the same time, a member of the team. This position has the potential for creating tension. Furthermore, if the team does not work, the principal may be held accountable. As Wallace and Hall (1994) observe, "adopting a team approach in more than name is a high risk strategy for them [Heads]" (p.186). If the team does not work, not only does the principal lose credibility but also the potential 'synergy' which is often the result of working with others." (Wallace and Hall, 1994, p.186). The responsibilities of principals on SMTs is thus significant, to not only be seen to be supportive of collaborative decision-making, but to actually effect it in practice because of the likely benefits for the school. We now look more closely at what micropolitics is all about.

What is Micropolitics?

Micropolitics are an inevitable and ubiquitous characteristic of organisational life (Blase and Anderson, 1995; Lindle. 1999, Mawhinney. 1999; West, 1999). Hoyle defines micropolitical notions as "strategies by which individuals and groups in organisational contexts seek to use their resources of authority and influence to further their interests (1986, p. 126). Like Hoyle, Blase (1991) highlights the centrality of "influence" and "power" stating that micropolitics is about

> power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about cooperation and how people build support for themselves to achieve their ends. It is about what people in all social settings think about and have strong feelings about, but what is so often unspoken and not easily observed (Blase. 1991, p.1)

Hoyle's (1986) definition and the statement by Blase (1991) highlight some of the key notions of micropolitics of relevance to our consideration of SMTs in schools These include: power and authority, interpersonal relationships, trust and openness. collaboration and cooperation, covert as well overt actions and goal achievement - some of the very things underpinning team dynamics. They also suggest that micropolitics is not only concerned with the darker side of organisational life (Hoyle, 1986) or the `covert and illegitimate world of underhand manoeuvres and dirty tricks" (Hall and Wallace 1996, p.7), but that it also encompasses the cooperative and facilitative actions that can contribute to effective interpersonal interactions between and among members of an organisation. Thus, while power can be perceived as both positive (collaborative and goal oriented) and negative (protectionist and conflict driven), of significance in a micropolitical study is the perceived differences that individuals and groups may hold about the way power is being used resulting in either a positive or a negative effect. Such effects can be the result of interactions amongst individuals and can define the nature and form of future interactions (Beatty, 2000).

Bennett (1999) argues that we need to manage micropolitics for positive change. To do this, we need to better understand micropolitics if they are to he used more productively by members of Senior Management Teams in school settings.

Micropolitical Studies in Education

Research in the area of micropolitics has had a relatively short history, with Blase and Anderson (1995, p.4) maintaining that micropolitical studies in education emerged only in the last few decades. The first application of the micropolitical perspective to schools was carried out by Iannaccone in 1975 and concerned the interactions of teachers, administrators and students in Californian schools (Iannaccone, 1975 in Mawhinney 1999, p. 161). Since that time. the focus of many micropolitical studies has been on leaders and school leadership. For instance, Ball's (1987) seminal study examined the major styles of leadership used by British school Heads to control teachers. An important finding of this research was the dilemma Heads faced in achieving and maintaining "control (the problem of domination) whilst encouraging and ensuring social order and commitment (the problem of integration)" (Ball 1987, p.2).

Other studies have utilised a micropolitical lens to view the relationship among principals and teachers (Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers, 1990; Blase, 1990: Greenfield, 1991), assistant principals and teachers (Marshall, 1991); and teachers and students (Blase, 1991). While Blase's (1990) study was concerned with the politics of favouritism in schools, Greenfield's study (1991) found that effective leadership hinged on the principal's moral sources of influence on teachers. Greenfield argued that the principle's deep commitment to serve children in the school affected the development of cooperative relationships not only among the principals and teachers but also amongst the teachers. Hughes and James (1999) looked at the relationship between the Head and Deputy Head across several schools in the United Kingdom. Other authors (see for example, Wallace and Hall,

1994; Wallace and Huckman, 1999) have looked at senior management trams consisting not only of the Head and Deputy Head but also other members of staff in both primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom. What emerges from this suite of micropolitical research studies is the importance of examination of the dynamics of, and inter-relationships among, members of key groups such as SMTs.

More recently, several writers have argued that the study of micropolitics has a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the processes and practices of leadership in a time of school reform and restructuring (Lindle, 1999; Mawhinney, 1999; Datnow and Castellano, 2001). Education reform it is argued, has ”politicized schools in more overt ways" (Lindle, 1999, p.4) since micropolitics are inevitable when there are disagreements over competing values and struggles over power (Lindle, 1999). Central to reform is change and as Malen (1995, in Lindle 1999) observes, "change breeds ambiguity ... (and) ... ambiguity provides opportunity for shifts in the power structures of most schools" (p.4). For example, changing power structures in schools often occurs as a result of school-based management initiatives which encourage a wider cross-section of the school community - teachers, parents, other community members - to participate in decisions affecting the school and its policies. In this context, leaders are challenged to reconcile competing interests and demands by a range of players (Cranston, 2001).

Clearly, school-based management operational contexts require that educational leaders not be "lone rangers"; more and more they are expected to operate within a team structure, such as a Senior Management Team. Notably, a potential advantage of this is the creation of "synergy" where the team achieves much more than the sum of individual achievement (Hall and Wallace, 1996, Wallace, 2002; Wallace and Hall, 1994).

Using a Micropolitical Lens to Look at SMTs

There is no easily identifiable set of guiding principles and actions that members of SMTs can follow in order to create positive and well-functioning bodies, although writers such as Bolam et al (1993) and Bell (1992) offer suggestions (norms in the case of Bell) regarding such goals. Indeed, while the wider literature about teams and teamwork (see for example, Barker, 1999; Dunphy and Bryant, 1996) in other settings is useful, it does not necessarily capture the uniqueness of schools and their operations. Moreover, teams are typically not static and are likely to be evolving in response to the immediate environment and to issues (emerging from within and from outside) impacting on them. Competing values, differing personalities, past histories, and the ongoing dynamics and interactions amongst members of teams all contribute to making such bodies complex and unique. For these and other reasons, team work is problematic even in the most favourable situations (Wallace and Hall, 1994, p.193). A successful and effective team in one context may not be so in another. As Hall and Wallace's (1996) research found, there was great variation in the working practices of the SMTs across the schools in their study, even though all of the schools which participated in the study had been described as having SMTs which were positive towards the idea of team work with each having a strong commitment to work effectively as a team.

In short, the challenge for SMTs is captured by Hall and Wallace (1996) who observed that what they saw in their research with such bodies reminded them of a marriage: "there were high and low points and sometimes divorce hovered uncomfortably in the wings” (p.3). Even in situations where team members were engaged purposively toward achieving common goals, “sacrifices were inevitably demanded regarding individual preferences and future goals" (p.3). This is captured in the notions of a "united front” noted earlier. Hall and Wallace’s metaphor underscores the tremendous challenges faced by members of SMTs, the give and take required, and the need for members of the team to sometimes put the team's interest, and that of the school, ahead of their own when it is warranted.

While acknowledging the difficulties in establishing guidelines or principles for the operation of SMT’s in schools, there are some issues or pointers evident in the micropolitical literature, and supported in some ways by the work of Bolam et al (1993) and others, that might be used by members of SMT’s to critically reflect upon their practices and processes as they strive to make collaborative and positive contributions to their schools. The five issues or pointers identified here are:

1. Clearly defining the roles and objectives of the SMT;
2. Ensuring the competency, credibility and commitment of SMT members;
3. Developing a shared culture, values and beliefs and effective team work processes among members of the SMT;
4. Developing quality relations with other staff and ensuring communication with them is effective; and,

5. Ensuring there are learning opportunities available for members of the SMT to ensure they can operate competently.

Each of these is now considered in more detail.

1. *Clearly defining the roles and objectives - for individual members and overall for the SMT*

Based on a qualitative survey of 65 primary Heads in the United Kingdom, Wallace and Huckman (1996) reported that Principals identified the importance of achieving clear definitions of roles and objectives as central to SMT success. This finding was also supported by case study research on primary and secondary Heads (Wallace and Hall, 1994; Wallace, (2002). In their study of the interrelationships between Deputy Principals and Principals in ten primary schools, Hughes and James (1999) noted that a shared understanding of each member of the team's responsibilities and area of operation was critical for building a successful relationship among the team. Central to achieving clarity of role and expectations requires a willingness and opportunities to engage in ongoing discussion to negotiate roles and responsibilities as new tasks and issues emerge.

Important matters for members of SMTs to consider here include: the main purposes of the team; how well these are understood by all team members; and, the specific roles of members in seeking to achieve these purposes.

2. *Ensuring the competency, credibility and commitment of SMT members*

Wallace's (2002) research identified competent performance by team members as a key factor in contributing to team effectiveness. Evans (1998) work noted that one of the negative attitudes held by teachers towards the team related to the team's credibility. For example, in one reported

instance, the principal was viewed as "an exceptionally poor manager" (p. 421) as well as inadequate in terms of his knowledge of pedagogy and educational issues, while the other members of the SMT were viewed as lacking credibility because of their irrational approach to decision-making. Unlike the principal in Greenfield's (1991) study who was able to influence staff through her deep commitment and concern for children, staff in Evans' (1998) study questioned the top down decisions made by the SMT on policies which they saw were not in children's best interests. The staff's negative views about the competence of the SMT resulted in little professional respect for the SMT.

Important matters for SMT's to consider here include: a need to ensure they are in the best position to make certain decisions; a willingness to seek and reflect on feedback regarding their performance from key stakeholders, particularly as a focus for improvement and learning; and, a willingness to ensure they are making decisions in the best interests of the students, consistent with the educational goals of the school.

3. *Developing a shared culture, values and beliefs and effective team work processes among members of the SMT*

Wallace (2002) and Wallace and Huckman (1996) reported that success in SMTs depends not only on the competence of individual team members but also their ability to work effectively together to create a shared SMT culture. This was seen as vital in terms of possessing a set of shared beliefs and values regarding the schools mission and goals. Hughes and James' (1999) study also highlighted the importance of shared values and beliefs and development of a collaborative process for decision-making. A common norm or shared belief held by the SMTs in Hall and Wallace's (1996) case studies of SMTs in secondary schools was that decisions should be made by seeking to achieve consensus, So that all members of the team would contribute to the debate. Noteworthy, however, is that conflict rather than consensus was the outcome in some situations where members of the team were perceived to have a greater say and were thus viewed as "more equal" than others (Hall and Wallace, 1996; Wallace and Huckman, 1996). Wallace (2002) identified that a positive and shared SMT culture could be inhibited from developing as a result of a dominating Head who made most of the decisions. This also occurred where members of the SMT did not accept the Head's ultimate responsibility for decisions (Wallace, 2002).

Hughes and James (1998) research noted that successful relationships between Heads and Deputy Heads were characterised by both parties being alike in some ways, particularly where they

held similar values and beliefs and had shared understandings. Importantly, the research found that differences in personality were not perceived as problematic providing that such differences are "acknowledged, viewed positively and constructive use made of them" (p.6). For instance, Hughes and James (1998) noted that some individuals in the Head - Deputy Head pairings had different styles of management, yet this was not a source of contention if the differences compensated and complemented. What was important was that there was tolerance and acceptance of the differences and an ability to accommodate the differences. Thus, central to a shared SMT culture is a positive working relationship where all members participate fully and communicate openly with one another (Wallace, 2002). Of note is that teachers were able to perceive cases where there was little unity and little cohesion amongst the SMT (Evans, 1998). Finally, Evans (1998) noted that shared values among the managers and the rest of the staff are important in determining SMT success (p.425).

Important matters for SMT's to consider here include: the values and beliefs of individual team members and their correlation or otherwise with those of the school; the receptivity of individuals and the team overall to different and challenging ideas; the sharing of power and decision-making shared among all members of the group; the attention given to development of team members' interpersonal skills to make teams work; and, whether there is a culture of trust and support among the team.

4. *Developing quality relations with other staff and ensuring communication with them is effective*

Wallace and Huckman's (1996) study indicated the importance Principals placed on fostering positive attitudes among other staff towards the SMT and establishing clear lines of communication. Strategies used by members of SMTs included developing positive relationships with staff; making themselves accessible to staff and staff concerns; setting parameters which enabled two way communication to take place between the SMT and staff; and, ensuring as much as possible an open and visible consultation process. Hall and Wallace (1996) noted that communication also related to SMT members presenting a united front to staff even if there had been disagreement amongst themselves in making a particular decision. "Loyalty" and "support" were the terms Hughes and James (1999) identified as underpinning a "united front".

Wallace (2002) identified a number of factors which impede good communication processes between SMTs and other staff. These were: where the SMT was seen as unapproachable or inaccessible; when there was a failure to consult staff sufficiently to harness their expertise and knowledge; when a Head did not delegate enough; and where there was a lack of unity in the SMT. Evans (1998) reported factors such as a lack of communication and a lack of genuine interest and concern for teachers' contributions as problematic for SMTs. Highlighted were instances where teachers viewed the SMT critically because teacher involvement in decision making was almost minimal. Further, it seemed that when opinions were sought, some staffs' opinions counted more than others and some staff were not listened to (p.421). The overall effect caused by the SMT was one of divisiveness with the establishment of two opposing groups: "the managed" and "the managers". Wallace and Hall (1994) argued that divisiveness can be minimised if SMT members make a concerted effort to listen to staff and include them in decision-making processes. Where this does not happen, detrimental repercussions on teacher morale and teacher quality of life can result (Evans, 1998). Thus, in short, SMTs can "reduce rather than increase, democratization" (p.427).

Important matters for SMT's to consider here include: adopting practices that ensure the operations and deliberations of the SMT are transparent; presenting a united view on decisions taken by SMTs; ensuring the wider staff have opportunities to both input to decision-making processes as well a having access to information about such processes and their outcomes

5. *Ensuring there are learning opportunities available for members of the SMT to ensure they can operate competently*

Hall and Wallace (1996) identified two different types of learning opportunities which SMT members pursued. First, a planned induction into the SMT was seen as particularly important for assisting new members of the team to be socialised and integrated into the workings of the team.

Secondly, individual members of the team, as well as whole team, participated in structured development activities to provide training to support team development. Hall and Wallace note that team development training can fall down in situations when all members of the team do not participate

in the training. Other research (see for example, Bell, 1992; Cardno, 1999, 2002; Senge, 1990) suggests that teams need to participate in ongoing learning and reflection if they are to improve their overall effectiveness as a unit. Participation in critical reflection requires a certain type of openness to what is working as well as areas that need to be addressed (Cardno, 2002). Cardno maintains that the challenge in team learning "lies at the point where people collectively interact to overcome the forces that work against honest communication, especially in situations fraught with conflict" (p. 220). Importantly, she sees that leaders need to "take the lead" in providing ongoing learning opportunities for team members and learn members need to be open to such learning. She cautions, however, that if team learning and development are not seen as critical areas for SMTs to pursue, then the potential for teams to learn may well go unrealised.

An important matter here for SMT's to consider is their need to identify, acknowledge and address their learning needs (individual and well as whole-team) to ensure individuals and well as the team all contribute to the SMT

Conclusion

It is likely, that in the absence of any more 'attractive' alternative, SMTs are here to stay in schools. Understanding them better and their dynamics and ensuring their contribution to school goals remains an important undertaking for schools and educational leaders. To these ends, micropolitics provides a useful lens through which SMTs can be examined because it is about the quality and interplay of relationships among members of the team.

Using such a micropolitical lens, the discussion here has identified a number of pointers or issues that SMTs might find useful in reflecting on their practices, their relationships and their impact in schools. Clearly, there is much untapped further conceptualisation and research potential here.

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